

History: why don't we all speak Walloon?



The 1905 Congress at La Boverie, in Liège © Wallonie.be

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What is the identity of Wallonia? In 1905, the 5th Walloon Congress was organized in Liège to observe and evaluate Wallonia's place in History and project it into the future. For the speakers, it is also a matter of preparing a 'defense' program against what they call 'flaming exaggerations'.

Did this 1905 Congress bear fruit? Did we subsequently witness what we could call 'the cultural legitimization of Wallonia'?

Elements of response with Maud Gonne, FNRS research fellow in translation studies.

The national context

Seven years earlier, the vote on the Equality law, called the 1898 law or Coremans-De Vriendt law, profoundly changed the landscape of Belgium. It stipulates that laws are now passed, sanctioned and published in French and Dutch.

"It may not seem like much, but it is a big step towards the establishment of bilingualism in Belgium as we know it today. This will cause a lot of tension" underlines Maud Gonne.

Putting French and Flemish on the same footing is felt to be unfair by Walloon activists, who see no reason to impose Flemish everywhere in Belgium. The professional configuration risks being disrupted, with a decline in recruitment on the Walloon side.

The congresses which took place previously in various Walloon towns, between 1890 and 1893, aimed mainly at defending French in Brussels. The 1905 Congress is special because it will attempt, for the first time, and in response to this law, to define a Walloon identity, to exalt a Walloon soul.

The Walloon Movement

Among the pioneers of the Walloon Movement, there were the founding members of the magazine Wallonia, Archives wallonnes d'autrefois, created in 1892.

The liberal Julien Delaite, for his part, founded the Walloon League of Liège in 1897, which would own its own press organ until 1902: L'Âme wallonne.

Liège plays a leading role in this Walloon question and during this Walloon Congress. As an independent principality until the French Revolution, it has its history and its uniqueness to highlight.

The Walloon League of Liège decides to organize this 5th Walloon Congress as part of the 1905 Universal Exhibition which is held in Liège, a date which corresponds to the 75th anniversary of the independence of Belgium.

The Congress intends to exclude any political consideration, to remain outside of any party spirit. But we know well that everything relating to language is political, in Belgium... The term 'race politics' is mentioned omnipresent.

"We are not attacking the Flemish but we intend to flog the Flemish exaggerations which threaten the integrity of the Belgian homeland. We also want to highlight what the Walloons were in the past, what they are achieving in the present and what what they aspire to for the future", Julien Delaite will say in his speech.

Shortly before the Liège congress, Antwerp MP Coremans had declared: "The Walloons have an inglorious past."

The place of Walloon in everyday life

From 1830, Belgium was a nation where the ruling elite spoke French and where the bourgeoisie was bilingual; in the north of the country, Franco-Flemish, in the south of the country, Franco-Walloon. The people speak dialects, Flemish, Walloon, Germanic.

There is very little official evidence of the presence of Walloon, because the language is not taken into account during linguistic censuses. Anyone who speaks Walloon is assimilated to French. A study nevertheless indicates that until 1920, 80% of the population preferred to use Walloon to communicate with local authorities, which proves that they did not only speak Walloon among themselves.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Walloon was still widespread.

The place of the Walloon in public and political life

The 1905 Congress took place mainly in French. Walloon is used for some more symbolic interactions: a commemoration at Sainte Walburga, with a speech in Walloon, to commemorate the involvement of the Walloons in the Belgian Revolution of 1830. And at the final banquet, we of course sing in Walloon.

The place of Walloon in public life, in administration, education, justice, is at the center of the debates.

Julien Delaite questions the 1898 law which allows one to be judged in Flemish, both in Flanders and in Brussels. It is unfair for the Walloons, because we use the term 'Vlaamse taal', Flemish language. Which means that we put one language, French, and what we consider to be a myriad of dialects, on the same level.

"The perspectives for a speaker of a dialogue or a language are obviously not the same at the professional level. Walloon activists are afraid for the social emancipation of young Walloons. If they have to learn another dialect, rather than "a national language, like English or German, is problematic and the discourse has not changed today," observes Maud Gonne.

Julien Delaite requires that magistrates have at least an oral knowledge of Walloon, to be sure that the accused can understand the debates and to ensure that there is not a body of mainly Flemish magistrates active in Wallonia. He also calls for Franco-Walloon bilingualism for civil servants in contact with the public in Wallonia.

Translators have been very present in Flanders since the beginning. Translation is the weapon of the Flemish Movement to gradually impose the Flemish language at the national level. In Wallonia, this is not institutionalized. This is where the shoe will hurt...

Walloon in education

The language of education is another point of debate in Congress. Flemish-French bilingualism is necessary in Flanders. So why not Walloon-French bilingualism in Wallonia?

"The question of teaching Walloon in Wallonia is rarely addressed because it remains a very symbolic question. Philologists would like Walloon to be given pride of place, because French is already a foreign language for young Walloons. Flemish would be an obstacle to the social advancement of these young people who already have to learn a foreign language" explains Maud Gonne.

Between moderates and radicals, the debate will ultimately focus on French versus Flemish. Walloon is thus used to impose and maintain French at the national level and to maintain the French-speaking elite in place.

Did this 1905 Congress bear fruit?

The Congress of 1905 succeeded for a time in building a Walloon identity, which was increasingly exported. We are publishing more and more works on Walloon originality, translations are being made into Walloon, we are organizing exhibitions of Walloon art...

The First World War will unfortunately cause a rupture, already because in 1918, a surge of patriotism followed the Liberation. We put aside regional differences.

Furthermore, from 1921, the law of territorial monolingualism and bilingualism in Brussels pushed the question of the Walloon language to the wayside. In 1920, a chair of dialectology opened at the Belgian Academy and from then on, Walloon no longer had any chance of becoming a language.

After 1918, public education became compulsory and took place in French, which marked the decline of Walloon.

For Maud Gonne, a good translation policy could have contributed, by strengthening its visibility and identity, to the preservation of Walloon, which unfortunately today is seriously threatened.

Walloon cultural identity is still very present, even if it is rather weak compared to Flemish cultural identity.